

The Peppermints

By Martha Rofheart

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Published By Evan Rofheart

Preface

My mother was an actress first and then a writer, both in life and how she thought of herself. I think that when she wrote she was really creating a play; in three acts if it was a novel or a playlet when she wrote her stories. If she could have been remembered for her stage career but forgotten as an author, that would have been just fine with her.

Martha Jane Jones was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1917 to a father of Welsh-Scottish heritage and a mother whose ancestors were among the first Europeans in New Amsterdam and Virginia. Within eighteen months of her birth, her mother Noreen had died in the flu epidemic and her young heartbroken father allowed his parents to raise little Martha Jane.

“The Peppermints”, like all of my mother’s short stories were essentially true stories, with only the names or places changed. While many of her other stories are longer, “The Peppermints” is truly a “short story” at eight pages.

Six of her novels were published, but none of her many short stories ever found a buyer. Reading the rejection letters from magazines, (yes, she saved each one) over and over the theme is, “it’s a beautiful story, but not realistic” or “well written, but not modern enough.”

I am pretty sure that “The Peppermints” was written in 1970 or ’71. My Mother died in 1990, and it seemed that her short stories would never see the light of day. Well, now in this modern era thanks to amazon, we have kindle, and so I am publishing all her unpublished stories, starting with “The Peppermints”. I hope that they find an appreciative audience!

Evan Rofheart
October 2013
New York City

The Peppermints, by Martha Rofheart

When I was a very small child, there was still, on the street where I lived, a firehouse which kept a stable of fire horses. Even then I knew that these were the last in the city, and were only kept, in a sort of civic nostalgia, for show.

On Saturday evenings, in the summer, people came from blocks away to watch the horses drill, the ladies in their thin summer dresses, with Manila palm leaf fans, and the men in crumpled pongee suits and stiff straw boaters. They watched the horse drill as gravely as children, applauding the beautiful, arrogant creatures.

We went, one summer, every Saturday night, my Aunt Evvie and I, to see the ‘fire ponies’. I called them this, as a child will, reducing everything to little, though to me they were enormous, gaudy, and breathtaking.

I can remember the pattern of these excursions as though they had happened yesterday, for they were always the same and always high adventure.

I lived in my grandparents’ house, a rambling white wood structure, with a pillared porch, and rooms added on every which way. The downstairs bathroom had been converted from a linen closet, and had no proper window. My grandfather had cut a sort of large porthole near the ceiling, rigged out with a complicated system of pulley chains for opening and closing. This was where I had my evening bath. It was difficult for me to get down to the business of bathing, for I was fascinated by this mechanism, and was forever pulling the chains, making the light come and go, and the wind blow. Finally someone would call, “Laura Anne, stop fooling with that chain, and get in that tub! One more pull, and I would step on to my little stool, and carefully down into the water.

After a bit, my Aunt Evvie would come in, carrying my freshly ironed clothes. She would scrub behind my ears, pull the plug to let the soapy water out, and dry me off in a big towel. Then she would help me with my back buttons. I would be all dressed, smelling of Ivory soap and starch, except for my ‘good’ shoes, which were freshly whitened, and drying on the kitchen windowsill. I would stiffen my elbows - it was a little game we had - and Aunt Evvie would pick me up by them like a jointed doll, and carry me to the kitchen, saving my white socks.

Supper was early over in those days, and the big kitchen was empty and neat, already cavernous with the lengthening shadows. I would be stood upon a chair in what was left of the light, to have my long hair brushed into sausage curls. This was tedious for both of us, as I would

only stand still under the threat of no ponies, and Aunt Evvie was inclined to yank a bit and push me about rather roughly; she used to wet the brush, and her impatient flicking sent icy drops down my back. I was afraid to protest, or even shiver, for I really believed she might not take me to the drill.

Aunt Evvie was the youngest of my father's sisters - she must have then been still in her teens - and really the prettiest, but she had no beaux, and already spoke of herself as an 'old maid'. The other two aunts, Gwennie and Liz, had hordes of young men about them, and were 'at the University', so I did not see so much of them.

Anyhow, Saturday night was me, and Aunt Evvie, and going to the ponies. It was a town laying in a valley, beside a river, and the air was hot and very still. There was a hush, as though the day knew it had come to an end; the sounds were all small, but very clear, as if they came from somewhere else. The katydids were beginning in the side yard when we walked around to the front porch. My grandmother sat there, in the wooden swing, talking across the narrow strip of lawn to the lady next door. Both ladies were fanning themselves, and complaining of the heat. My grandmother wore a dress of printed voile, and her cameo brooch. She had put a little talcum on her nose, to 'take away the shine', but her color was always high, and the white nose and red cheeks gave her a painted look.

Outside the front gate, my grandfather was mowing the patch of grass between the sidewalk and the street. He was tall and spare, and was still wearing his straw hat, though the sun was already down. There was a bird-dropping on the hat, and Aunt Evvie giggled. I knew what she was giggling at, but neither of us said anything, for my grandfather had a fine dignity one would not wish to spoil.

He offered to let me push the mower while Aunt Evvie went two doors away to fetch her best friend, Marilee. Marilee usually went to the ponies with us, for, though she was engaged to be married, her young man interned in City Hospital, and often worked late hours...

Grandpa tipped his defaced hat, and I turned to watch the two girls walk toward us. I liked Marilee. She had a kind of country beauty, broad-hipped and milkmaid fair; she smiled a lot and bounced when she walked. On the other hand, Aunt Evvie was tall, and so thin that she looked as if she might break in two. Her features were so regular as to be almost stern; she had a marble look. She had a heavy, massy head of hair, brown and very wavy, shingled in at the nape. They were pretty in the way young girls are in the summer, with their bare arms pale in the early twilight and their light dresses floating around them.

I walked along between them; holding a hand of each, and skipping. They murmured secrets above my head, and laughed softly. Every now and then they would swing me off my feet, for fun, and I would squeal and beg for more.

People were all out on their porches at this hour, and we made slow progress, stopping to chat here and there, and passing the time of day. The Nolan girls, across the street, were friends of Aunt Evvie, but we didn't cross over to them. They had a big dog, which sometimes bit. We waved, and called to them, and the big dog barked, and tried to knock the gate down. Aunt Evvie said Margie was going to have to get rid of that dog one of these days, and Marilee answered yes, that it was a nasty old thing. I didn't say anything. I thought it would be nice to have a dog, even if it did bite once in a while.

Mrs. Jones brought her little baby Granddaughter down to the fence for us to see. Grandpa called her 'Mrs. Plumber Jones', in the Welsh way, her husband being the neighborhood plumber. The baby's mother was dead, like mine, but Mrs. Plumber Jones didn't say anything about that, and let me put my finger out for the baby to hold. It was very little, like a doll, and had eyes like little round blue marbles. It didn't smile or anything, just stared, and fell asleep suddenly, still holding my finger. Mrs. Plumber Jones had to undo each little wrapped finger from off mine, and the place burned sweetly, like a secret. I folded it into my palm to keep it for a while.

We were coming to Grandpa Owens yard, and I said couldn't we stop on the way back from the ponies this time, to make sure we didn't miss them, but Aunt Evvie said no, not to be such a selfish little girl, Grandpa Owens was just sitting out there waiting for us to come along, so we had to stop there first.

I didn't really mind; Grandpa Owens was almost as thrilling as the ponies, he must have been quite old, for he had a whole family of children in Wales before he ever came here and married again and had my grandfather. He didn't look old, though- except in the way the people in the bible look old. He was theatrically, flamboyantly old. He was a very big man, six feet five, I was later told, and he was very erect. He had a great thin blade of a nose, and shoulder-length snow-white hair. He was very vain about his hair, and fretted if it wasn't washed every day. My other aunts, Gwennie and Liz, called him an old 'poseur', which they said was French for 'show-off', but Aunt Evvie loved him.

The old Owens' house sat farther back from the street than the houses next to it, and had more trees around it. It looked haunted, and many of the neighborhood children were convinced that it was, and used to hurry past it in the dark. It was a small Victorian mansion, dark brick,

with a mansard roof, and had a hunched and brooding look. Grandpa Owens had had it built around the turn of the century, with the first money from his boiler factory.

The house could only be seen in pieces, because of the trees, and the yard was bounded on the street side by a black wrought-iron fence. The fence was high, higher than my head, and had a fancy pattern of curlicues, with cruel-looking spears all along the top. There was a gate smack in the center of it; it was missing one hinge, and gave the whole thing a cock-eyed look. Grandpa Owens always sat in a wicker rocking chair very close up to the fence, a little ways north of the gate. You had to say hello to him first with the fence in between, and then go on past to the gate and go inside, and back to him.

He sat in the wicker chair, on a cushion covered with an old paisley shawl, his white hair, freshly washed, waving beside his lean old cheeks. He sat very squarely on the chair, looking straight ahead, like a carved figure on the front of a ship. His hands were crossed on one another, over a cane he had propped between his knees. This cane looked like it belonged to an ogre out of my Grimm's Fairy Tale book, for it was made of some dark, knobbly wood, like a root, and was as thick as a man's arm. The knob on top was made of something he called a narwhal tusk, which, at one time, long ago, was ground up and made into medicine. I did not know if this was true, but that is what he said, and it did look like some kind of big tooth. It was bound to the cane by a thick gold band. I have never seen another cane like it anywhere.

As we came up to him, he bowed slightly at the waist, without getting up, in a sort of kingly way. Then we went past him to the gate. It sagged slightly from the missing hinge, and had to be lifted a little to swing open. As it did so, it gave out a long, low sound, somewhere between a whistle and a sigh, and we went through. He always kissed Aunt Evvie's and Marilee's hands, and they giggled. Then he would take out from his vest rocket a big gold watch, open it and hold it to his ear. Satisfied that it was running, he would announce the time, snap it shut, and return it to its place in his pocket.

Then it was my turn. He would place the cane carefully on the ground, and beckon to me. "Laura Anne," he would say, "How's my little sweet patootie today?" I think it was the only slang he knew, and it was very old-fashioned even then. He would smile a little wintry smile with his lips closed, and turn his cheek for me to kiss. It felt smooth, and a little cool, like the leather of our Morris chair at home. Then he would draw me between his knees, where the cane had been, and squeeze them together slightly. It made me short of breath and was a little frightening, like everything about him, but I liked it. He smelled like ripe tobacco and violets. Aunt Evvie told me once that Grandpa Owens used a violet-scented talcum powder, and washed his hair in violet soap from France.

He would ask me what I had done that day, and listen when I told him. Although he was so old, he always listened, not like most grown-ups, who just smiled and pretended. Then, each time, he would teach me a Welsh word. The only one I can remember is ‘bach’, which sounded like a cough, and meant ‘darling’, I think. Then he would take out the watch again, and give it to me to hold. He would ask me if I could tell the time, and I could, so then I would tell him the time, and he would nod, and put the watch away. Then he would say it was time for us to run along to the fire drill.

We would turn away and get as far as the gate, sometimes outside it, and then he would call me back. “Sweet patootie”, he would say, and his eye would have a twinkle in it, “Sweet patootie, I guess we forgot something. Grandpa Owens forgot to give you something.” And he would reach into another pocket and take out a little white paper bag. He would put his hand into the paper bag and take out one big round white lozenge, and put it into my hand. “Eat it on the way home,” he said. And then we would really go.

I always did wait to eat it on the way home, holding it in my hand all the time we watched the ponies, and it would melt a little and make my hand sticky. Aunt Evvie used to complain on the way back when she had to take that hand. She said I could have eaten it right away, he would never know. But I was afraid he would, and I ate it on the way home. It was not very sweet and it was the strongest peppermint I ever tasted. It burnt my mouth and made tears come to my eyes. Every Saturday night I went to bed with my mouth stinging, even after I had brushed my teeth. It was exciting.

Grandpa Owens was never there when we came back from the ponies. Aunt Evvie said he had to go to bed very early, like a little child, because he was so old, and old people, she said, had something called ‘second childhood’. I never could credit this; I didn’t think Grandpa Owens was anything like a child. But it is true that he was never sitting there after dark, and the house was all shut up, with no lights.

Every Saturday night that summer, we visited Grandpa Owens, and went to the fire drill, and I ate the red hot peppermint on the way home.

In the fall, everything changed. I went to kindergarten. I was getting to be a big girl, and was allowed to go with a neighbor girl who was in the third grade. In the early part of the school year, we used to see Grandpa Owens sitting way back on his front porch, but the third grade girl was afraid of him and used to hurry me past.

I never saw Grandpa Owens after winter came. It was too cold for him to sit outside, and when spring came he was sick in bed. Sometimes I asked Aunt Evvie about him, and she said he was too sick to see anybody.

Summer came again, and school was finished, but we never went to see the fire ponies again. Aunt Evvie said they were getting old and had to be sent to the boneyard. I didn't know what the boneyard was, but it sounded terrible, so I didn't ask. I guess Aunt Evvie thought that was a funny thing to say. Later I found out that the fire horses ended their days in a beautiful pasture that was part of My Old Kentucky Home, where people could come and see them running wild. I was awfully glad.

One very hot day in July, I was cleaned up in the morning, which didn't usually happen, and dressed all in white. I heard my grandmother say everyone was going; she had no one to leave me with, but I could just stay on the porch. Then Aunt Evvie came, and she was dressed all in black on that hot day, and she said we had to go and pay our respects to Grandpa Owens, and I'd better be a good girl and not give anybody any trouble. Her nose was red and her eyes looked funny, so I didn't ask what 'respects' were.

My other aunts came out too, and my grandparents, and they were all, every one of them, dressed in black clothes. We went out to the garage and got into the car. It wasn't a very long walk to Grandpa Owens' house, and my grandfather never liked to drive, so I wondered, but nobody said anything. They all looked like the air feels when it's going to thunder, sort of still and held-in.

Nobody talked much on the drive, except my grandmother said, never mind, Grandpa Owens had had a good life, never mind. I asked if it was his birthday today and Aunt Evvie said, hush, and started to cry. Then my grandmother said hush to her, and told me that Grandpa Owens had gone to heaven. I started to think about that, but we got to Grandpa Owens' house then and everybody had to get out of the car. There were a lot of people in the front yard, and on the porch, and some of them said hello, but we went on around to the back porch.

There were a lot of people there, too. There were so many that I couldn't tell right away if I knew any of them. The back porch had a big white railing around it and two wide steps. My grandmother hugged me and said for me to sit on the steps, and pull my skirt down. She smelled the way a cedar chest does when you open it. She said I should sit there while she went in to see Grandpa Owens, and then she put a handkerchief to her eyes. It had a black border to it. My other aunts, Gwennie and Liz, went right in the house, but Evvie stooped down to me. The tears were running down her little marble face, and she said, quite fiercely, you be a good girl now, and don't laugh. I never thought of laughing. Then she went inside, too.

I wondered how they could go and see Grandpa Owens if he was gone away, but I didn't think about it long because there were so many people there on the porch to look at. They looked like they were in church, all the men with their coats on. Some of them had black bands on their sleeves. They were all drinking something out of little glasses, like doll glasses. Some of them were sitting down, but most were leaning against the porch rail. On the other end of the step a boy was sitting. He was older than I was, but not very much, and he had red hair. One of the men said he was my cousin Owen from Alabama. There were an awful lot of Owens in our family. There was Grandpa Owens, and my real grandfather, and my father, too, was named Owen, and I also had a couple of Uncle Owens, and now here was a cousin! Our last name was Owens, so I guess a lot of people would have thought it sounded funny, Owen Owens, but I was used to it. It was the old Welsh way of naming, like my uncle on my mother's side, he was Evan Evans. And there was a David Davis too, he was my grandfather's business partner.

My cousin Owen didn't feel like talking to me much, because I was a girl, and younger. But he had a turtle, and he let me pick it up. It tried to bite me and he took it back. It had very old-looking eyes, but he said it was a baby turtle.

Mattie came out from the house with a big tray. She was the hired girl, but she didn't have her apron on today. She had a black dress, like everybody else, only hers had a brownish, rusty look. Mattie was pretty old, but she was always called the hired girl any way. She brought over two glasses of lemonade for me and for Cousin Owen, and she was crying out loud.

I was very glad for the lemonade, it was getting hot there on the porch; it was just about noon, I guessed. I sipped the lemonade slowly to make it last, and watched the men. I sort of recognized some of them, I think they were part of the family, but nobody paid any attention to me or even said hello. They were all drinking all the time from those little glasses; they must have been very hot, but none of them took off their coats. They were talking about Grandpa Owens. One of them called him an old rooster, and everybody else laughed. I didn't think it was very polite.

Then my Uncle Jack Owens came out of the house. He wasn't really my uncle, he was my grandfather's brother, but I called him that. He was always nice to me, really paying attention if I said something, and I was glad to see him. I had to get up and take him by the hand, though, because he was pretty nearly blind. He came over and sat on the steps with me. He looked a lot like Grandpa Owens, but younger, and had curly yellow hair, he would have been a handsome man like a Prince in a fairy tale book, except for his eyes. They moved around a lot, and looked sort of faded. You didn't like to look at them too much, especially knowing they couldn't see.

He talked to me a lot, though, Uncle Jack Owen, and asked me the color of my dress. When I told him white, he shook his head and said, that was a shame, because Grandpa Owens had always liked me in blue, on account of my eyes.

In a little while, someone came and called Uncle Jack Owen, and he had to go back into the house. He said he had something for me, and reached into his pocket. He brought out a big white paper bag and gave it to me. “He was saving them up for you, Laura Anne,” he said. And then he left.

I opened the bag and looked inside. It was all full of Grandpa Owens’ hot peppermints. There must have been nearly a hundred.

I didn’t feel like eating one, though. I just sat there, knowing Grandpa Owens would never have given me a whole bag of peppermints all at once. Wherever he was, he was gone far away, and forever.

The End

About The Author



Martha Rofheart was a writer of historical novels and an actress. She was born Martha Jones May 27, 1917 in Louisville, KY. She arrived in New York City when she was seventeen years old and began working as a model with the Harry Conover agency. An actress in the 1940s and 1950s, she made her Broadway debut with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in "The Pirate" in 1942. She appeared in Blythe Spirit, Arsenic and Old Lace, The Heiress, The Respectful Prostitute, and other plays, and toured with Katherine Cornell, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, and Maurice Evans.

She was married in 1952 to Ralph Rofheart, an art director and advertising executive, by whom she had one child Evan, in 1957. Soon after her son was born, she chose to be a full time mother, and she stopped pursuing acting. In the late 1960s she began working as a freelance advertising copywriter. In the early 1970s, Rofheart wrote a novel of Henry V of England, "Fortune Made His Sword", published in the UK as "Cry God For Harry". Critic Granville Hicks, reviewing "Fortune Made His Sword" in The New York Times Book Review, wrote that Rofheart "deftly avoids the dangers" of writing about a subject that's "Shakespeare territory".

After "Fortune Made His Sword", Rofheart wrote five novels, "Glendower Country", in the UK published as "Cry God for Glendower", "My Name Is Sappho", a fictionalized theatrical family saga entitled "The Savage Brood", "The Alexandrian" a novel about Cleopatra, and "Lionheart! A Novel of Richard I, King of England".

Martha Rofheart's novels have been translated into German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Serbian. A new translation of the Alexandrian was published in Italy in 2013.

She died in 1990, in New York City.

Face-book: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Martha-Rofheart/101554942496>

More from Martha Rofheart

At Martha Rofheart's amazon author's page you can find links to all of her other books, all of which are available from used book sellers. All the books were first published in Hardcover and then in Paperback.

Amazon Author's Page: [amazon.com/author/rofheart](https://www.amazon.com/author/rofheart) & [Wikipedia : Martha Rofheart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Rofheart)

A note about titles: Some of the books have different titles in North America and the UK.

“[Fortune Made His Sword](#)” (1972) about Henry V of England, was also published in England with the title, “**Cry God For Harry**”, trading one Shakespeare quote for another. Critic Granville Hicks, reviewing Fortune Made His Sword in The New York Times Book Review, wrote that Rofheart "deftly avoids the dangers" of writing about a subject that's "Shakespeare territory".

“[Glendower Country](#)” (1973) was renamed “**Cry God For Glendower**”, probably because in the UK “Cry God For Harry” was such a success. The Welsh consider Owen Glendower the last true “prince of Wales” and a leader for Welsh sovereignty.

“[My Name is Sappho](#)” (1974) for some reason was renamed, “**Burning Sappho**”. Strange because she is not all that ‘Hot’, mainly Sappho can be seen as the first feminist in the Western world.

“[The Alexandrian](#)” (1976) about Cleopatra, which kept its title in the UK, has proved to be very popular worldwide, recently being translated and published in Italy as, “**La regina di Alessandria**”.

“[The Savage Brood](#)”, (1978) tells the story of a fictional theatre family, spanning the centuries from Henry V's day up to the 1970s.

“[Lionheart! A Novel of Richard I King of England](#)”, (1981) is set in the twelfth century and the Crusades.

Notes about the story.

The names in the story are fictionalized, but are based on real people and revolve around real events when my mother was four years old.

For clarity I have decide to match the fictional names with the real people here. – Editor

Laura Anne : Martha Jane Jones

Aunt Evvie : Edith Jones

Aunt Gwennie : Jeanette Jones

Aunt Liz : Ruth Jones

Grandpa Owens : William Owen Jones (W.O.)

Grandmother : Lizzie Jones

Grandpa : Evan Jones, Sr.

Cousin Owen : Harry Jones (Nashville, TN)

David Davis : David “Druid” Walton

Uncle Jack Owens : John Austin Jones



W.O. Jones - The real Grandpa Owens



Grandpa Owens' House